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TREUTION STATEMENT A

Approved for public releas Distribution Unlimited

81 6 15 028

Abstract

Environmental and Organizational Stresses and Health

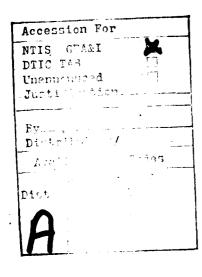
E. K. Eric Gunderson*

This report provides a review of research on environmental and organizational influences on health and describes a large-scale study in progress which involves questionnaires, interviews, on-site observations, medical data, and personnel and organizational records gathered in 23 naval organizations (20 combat ships and three shore stations) and three civilian organizations. Retest data were obtained for nine ships to provide evidence of stability or change in major dimensions studied. A general social systems model was developed for the study which encompasses a wide-range of environmental, organizational, and individual variables and provides a framework for analyzing relationships between the individual and his environment in an organizational context and also for evaluating the effectiveness of individuals, organizational units, and the organization as a whole in achieving organizational objectives.

The physical environment is viewed as an important component of the social system model. The environment has an impact at several levels of analysis and interacts with all other components to influence behavioral outcomes at individual and group levels. The environmental dimensions included in the current studies were: spatial size (crowding), temperature, ventilation, noise, illumination, color, cleanliness, odor, design of fixtures and furnishings, privacy, storage space, and safety factors. These dimensions can be used to characterize the organizational environment as a whole, or,

if significant variability is present, to differentiate among areas or spaces within the total organizational environment. Both the actual physical conditions and individual perceptions of those conditions are taken into account in assessing the effects of environment on illness. Sources of variance in environmental perceptions are separated into the following components: (a) physical aspects (objective physical conditions); (b) characteristics (perceived physical conditions on which individual raters show concensus), and (c) individual uniqueness (deviations of individual perceptions from the group mean). Finally, a difference effect can be computed (the difference between an objective measure and a characteristic or group mean). Using these separate components in predicting illness both increases prediction and helps explain why a relationship exists.

A large number of specific hypotheses pertaining to relationships between environmental and social stresses and health are tested. The results provide important new information concerning the determinants of health and effective work performance and, in addition, advances our theoretical understanding of the behavior of individuals in organizations in terms of explicating a broadly conceived social system model.



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SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE (When Data Entered

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE (When Data Entered)	
REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE	READ INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE COMPLETING FORM
1. REPORT NUMBER 2. GOVT ACCESSION NO	3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER
76-11 AD-A100	257
4. TITLE (and Subtitle)	S. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED
Environmental and Organizational Stresses and	Final
Health	6. PERFORMING ORG, REPORT NUMBER
7. AUTHOR(#)	8. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER(*)
E. K. Eric Gunderson	
9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS	10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBERS
Naval Health Research Center	
P.O. Box 85122	MF51.524.002-5019
San Diego, CA 92138	
II. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS	12. REPORT DATE
Naval Medical Research & Development Command	January 1976
National Naval Medical Center	13. NUMBER OF PAGES
Bethesda, MD 20014	3 (Abstract)
14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS(II different from Controlling Office)	15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this report)
Bureau of Medicine and Surgery Department of the Navy	Unclassified
Washington, DC 20372	15a. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING
	<u> </u>

16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this Report)

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited.

17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from Report)

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited.

18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

Presented at the International Congress of Psychology, Paris, France, 18-25 July 1976.

19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identity by block number)

Organizational factors

Social systems

Crowding

Morbidity

Naval personnel

20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)

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